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# **Contents**

<b><u>Introduction</u></b>	<b>p. 3</b>
<b><u>Chapter 1: The Domestic Kurdish Issue</u></b>	<b>p. 7</b>
<b><u>Chapter 2: From Reconciliation to Warfare</u></b>	
<b>2.1. The Kurdish Opening: 2009-2011</b>	<b>p. 11</b>
<b>2.2. The Solution Process: 2012-2015</b>	<b>p. 14</b>
<b><u>Chapter 3: Foreign Kurdish Policy</u></b>	
<b>3.1. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)</b>	<b>p. 27</b>
<b>3.2. Syria and the KRG</b>	<b>p. 35</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>p.41</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>p.44</b>

## **The Kurdish Question under AKP Policy**

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## **Introduction**

After the Turkish Republic was established in 1923 with the Treaty of Lausanne, its founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk set out to create the Turkish citizen. The Turkish nation became characterized as a community of Turkish-speaking Sunni Muslims from Turkish lineage. Armenian, Greek and Jewish communities in Turkey had received recognition as minorities in Turkey. No such recognition however was given to other ethnic groups such as Shiites and Kurds. The categorization had been shaped by a non-Muslim versus Muslim framework; not by elements of history, culture, language or ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> The Kemalist cultural policy alienated Turkey's largest ethnic minority. Like the Turks, the Kurds mostly adhere to Sunni Islam but differ in culture, language and history. The Kurds were denied the expression of ethnic culture and subjected to policies of assimilation. The authorities viewed the Kurds as Turks who had forgotten about their Turkishness, and referred to them as "Mountain Turks". Since 1925, this idea received responses in the form of Kurdish uprisings against the Turkish state. Kurdish wishes to preserve local cultural traditions were viewed as a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and political unity. Therefore, the uprisings were labeled as ethnic separatist movements by the state authorities and suppressed by implementing military measures. Until the 1990s, this policy remained intact until former President Turgut Özal spoke out on the issue. His death however came too early for him to act on his thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) emerged as a countermovement under

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<sup>1</sup> D.Y. Mousseau, 'An inquiry into the linkage among nationalizing policies, democratization, and ethno-nationalist conflict: the Kurdish case in Turkey', *Nationalities Policies*, No. 1

<sup>2</sup> E. Efeğil, 'Analysis of the AKP Government's Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue', *Turkish Studies*, no. 1 (2011), pp. 27-28.

the charismatic Abdullah Öcalan in 1978. At the time, the party had the goal to liberate Kurdistan through mass scale armed struggle, whereas nowadays this goal has shifted towards autonomy. After a military coup in 1980, which led to a crackdown of all leftist revolutionary organizations in the country, hundreds of PKK militants were captured and the organization was severely weakened. Its leader and a number of militants fled abroad to the Syrian-controlled Lebanese Beqaa Valley and the Qandil Mountains in northern-Iraq, from where the PKK started a guerilla war against the Turkish state in 1984, that is still going on today.<sup>3</sup>

When the AKP came in power in 2002, it was the first mainstream party to appeal to Kurds, by bringing high expectations. By promising economic prosperity and by passing EU-inspired reforms, the AKP managed to attract a sizable part of the Kurdish votes. Nevertheless, in the long-term, the relationship returned to being troubled. The problems between the government, which is determined to defend Turkey's territorial integrity, and the Kurdish minority are referred to as the "Kurdish Question". Comprising 11 to 15 million of Turkey's 74 million inhabitants, the Kurdish population is the largest minority in Turkey and is concentrated in the southeast and east of Turkey, although many have made the move to Istanbul and other urban centers.<sup>4</sup> What further complicates the picture, is that Turkey has more Kurds living right across the border in Syria, Iraq and Iran. While it maintains good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), it perceives the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria and its military wing the People's Protection Unit (YPG), as terrorist organizations. Together with the Kurdish militant organization of Iran, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), the PYD and PKK are united under the umbrella organization Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK).

The actors in the Kurdish Question are numerous and the topic can be discussed in many terms (economical, violations of human rights, culturally etc.) and countries (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria and the diaspora). This thesis will research the evolution of the Kurdish Question under AKP policy in political

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<sup>3</sup> M. Yegen, 'Armed Struggle to Peace Negotiations: Independent Kurdistan to Democratic Autonomy, or the PKK Context', *Middle East Critique*, no. 4 (2016), p. 373.

<sup>4</sup> R. Updegraff, 'The Kurdish Question', *Journal of Democracy*, no. 1 (2012), p. 119.

terms in the countries where Turkey experiences the most interactions with its Kurdish actors. These countries are Turkey itself, Syria and Iraq.

The thesis proceeds as follows: In the first chapter, the AKP's and Erdoğan's personal approaches towards the domestic Kurdish Question are presented, by briefly discussing Erdoğan's past actions regarding the issue during his time as an official for the Welfare Party (RP). When his history has become clear, I will move on to his early years into office, during which Erdoğan connected with the Kurds on an unprecedented level. Since the goal of this thesis is to explain the Kurdish Question under the AKP period, my aim is to demonstrate how views from the AKP on the question evolved over time. Therefore, the second chapter will logically follow up on the first by analyzing the peace processes, which are referred to as the "Kurdish Opening" (2009-2011) and the "Solution Process" (2012-2015). These processes are essential to understand the AKP's character in the whole question, and will perhaps give the reader some hope that a solution one day may come as a result of a new peace process. Just as unifying projects are important in shaping AKP policy, so are obviously the events that cause tensions between the two sides. I have outlined these events of tension as the 2015 elections that took place in June and November, and the constitutional referendum. These events have strongly affected the AKP's attitude and all will be clearly discussed in chapter two. The third chapter discusses the Kurdish Question across the border, by researching the AKP's connection with the Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria. These groups are essential to discuss, since they influence not only the AKP's foreign policy, but also Turkish domestic policy. The foreign and domestic dimensions of this issue are intertwined to such an extent that, as will be proven in this thesis, an event across the border has the power to cause the breakdown of a peace process in Turkey. The thesis ends with a conclusion, in which it will become clear how the AKP has positioned itself vis-à-vis the Kurdish question during its 15-year rule, how it has evolved, and how the Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish questions are all linked together.

In literature, much can already be found in the Kurdish Question in the three countries in question. What every author however knows, is that Turkey is a

tumultuous country and that the Kurdish Question is a constantly evolving topic. Fights between government forces and the PKK occur on a daily basis, rows in Parliament are frequent and the war in Syria is one of great impact. This article contributes to the literature on the Kurdish Question by discussing the newest information available at the time of writing. For example, very few scientific publications on the KRG's independence referendum are available at the time of writing, since it just took place on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2017. Furthermore, the Kurdish question is often researched in the context of one specific country. This thesis researches multiple countries, where the issue is most prominent for Turkey, and try to make an underlying connection.

As mentioned, the scope of this thesis is to reflect the AKP's positions on both the domestic and foreign Kurdish Question. Generally, a political party's discourse is the outcome of the combination of ideas from different actors within that party. For this reason, it's usually not enough to judge a party's policy on the basis of one character. But this is different in the case of Erdoğan, who is a different type of politician. Erdoğan has the ability to set discourse for the AKP and the agenda of the country. He has continuously fought to position himself as the most influential representative of the party, both as President and Prime Minister, and he and his officials usually speak with one mouth. For this reason I will use many of his speeches and quotes in determining what AKP policy towards the Kurdish Question entails in the given context. When possible, I have tried to get his (and his officials') opinions by compiling my data from Turkish newspapers, such as the leading national newspaper Hürriyet Daily, the state-run Anadolu Agency and the official government websites.

## Chapter 1: The Domestic Kurdish Issue

The first time Erdoğan formally expressed his vision on the Kurdish issue was recorded in 1991. As chairman of the Welfare Party's (RP) Istanbul district networks, he asked his advisor Mehmet Metiner to co-prepare a Kurdish report in order to improve the party's relations with the Kurdish electorate. The report that was presented to RP-chairman Necmettin Erbakan was shockingly straightforward in criticizing the existing policy. The report opened by framing the Kurdish problem in terms of an identity perspective by stating: "What is termed as 'the eastern problem' or 'southeastern problem' is in fact the 'Kurdish problem' [...] What is today defined as 'the east' or 'southeast' are in fact parts of what is historically known as Kurdistan. Kurdish, is irrelevant to Turkish and is a language spoken exclusively by the Kurds." The report goes on by describing the region as an area torn apart by PKK terror and state terror by security forces whose "activities in the region are almost non-legal". The report is significant because of its equal denunciation of both the PKK and the securities forces' activities. Therefore it suggested revising state policy by switching from a militaristic approach to a comprehensive approach that completed democracy and gave way to cultural plurality. Examples of this cultural plurality were the recognition of the Kurdish ethnicity, allowing all cultural rights, to grant education in the Kurdish language, denouncing racism and state terrorism, and a monitoring of human rights abuses. At the time of writing the report, Erdoğan did not fear the measures would strengthen feelings of secession. Instead, the Kurdish question could be used for electoral leverage. For the Welfare Party, the bond between Turkey's citizens did not find its strength in ethnicity, but in the shared religion of Islam.<sup>5</sup>

Erbakan subdivided the Kurdish issue into three categories: the Kurdish question, the southeastern question and terrorism. The Kurdish question referred to the recognition of the Kurdish identity and the granting of cultural rights, whereas the southeastern question dealt with the underdeveloped status quo of the region. "Terrorism" only encompassed only PKK violence. By switching terminology depending on the audience and context, Erbakan could

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<sup>5</sup> H.A. Ünver, 'Turkey's Kurdish Question: Discourse and politics since 1990', Routledge: Oxon 2015, pp. 153-154.

relate to his electorate in different regions. Erdoğan has continued this strategy by emphasizing projects of economic development, security operations and democratic reforms, depending on the selected audience.<sup>6</sup>

The AKP won the 2002 general election, establishing the first single-party government in a decade by winning 34.4% of the votes. The outcome however also signaled that the secular voters were not completely convinced by the successors of the Islamic Welfare Party. Therefore, support from the Kurds would be very welcome. The AKP period started off promising for the country's Kurds when a series of reforms were adopted to achieve the goal of EU-membership. The Kurds in Turkey benefited from the EU's demands for greater democracy in the country; the state of emergency was lifted, the State Security Courts were dissolved, pre-trial detention periods were reduced, legal restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language were annulled and Kurdish-language broadcasting was expanded. The promising reforms however stagnated when new restrictions came in place regarding civil rights and liberties. Up until today, the amendments made to anti-terrorism legislation are strongly debated in and outside Turkey. The faith of the Kurdish people in the AKP would gradually lower as a result, and their disappointment would eventually reflect in a lowered support for the AKP in the 2009 municipal elections. The results sent the message that Kurdish concerns had to be taken more seriously and served as a wake-up call for the AKP.<sup>7</sup>

Four years earlier however, in 2005, the Kurds had reasons to embrace the AKP. Erdoğan gave a historical speech in the largest Kurdish city of Diyarbakır in Turkey's southeast, that sent out an important message to the people inside and outside the country's borders. The Prime Minister admitted that Turkey had mishandled its Kurdish citizens in the past, and now had to face that past. Erdoğan stated that the answer to the Kurdish grievances was not more repression, but more democracy.<sup>8</sup> Such a clear expressions and self-criticism concerning the Kurdish issue by a Turkish leader were

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<sup>6</sup> H.A. Ünver, 'Turkey's Kurdish Question: Discourse and politics since 1990', Routledge: Oxon 2015, pp. 155.

<sup>7</sup> S.F. Larrabee, 'Turkey's New Kurdish Opening', *Survival*, no. 5 (2013), pp. 134-135.

<sup>8</sup> The Economist, 'Turkey and the Kurds: Peace be unto you', <http://www.economist.com/node/4300168>, accessed on 27-09-2017.

unprecedented and raised expectations for a normalization of ties. Aside from recognizing the existence of the Kurdish question, he also clarified his position on ethnic identities in general: “[Turkey has many] ethnic identities, Kurds, Laz, Circassian, Georgian, Albanian, Bosnian, Turkish. They all belong to us. They have one supra-identity and that is citizenship to the Turkish Republic.”<sup>9</sup> With the statement, Erdoğan portrays Turkey as a patchwork of ethnicities. The statement was strategically smart because it recognized the Kurdish identity, without granting them a privileged status. For all ethnicities, their future lies in Turkey and their problems should be solved by further democratization. Although the concept of further democratization doesn’t appear to be that extraordinary, the assertion that the Kurdish problems should be solved through non-military means was a true game changer.

As described in his Kurdish report of the 90s, Erdoğan was still under the assumption that the Kurds and Turks were bound by their shared religion of Sunni Islam. This however created a division between Kurds who venerated Islam and those who opted for the prioritization of Kurdishness, such as the PKK and the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP). This second group, which pursued special rights for the Kurds, continued to be criticized by Erdoğan and treated as potentially dangerous secessionists. The 2009 local elections however demonstrated that this group’s demands could not be satisfied and buried with investments in infrastructure and public works.<sup>10</sup> Visits to the Kurdish regions from AKP officials and appeals through the opened Kurdish TV channels had not resulted in the desired outcome.

The 2009 local elections were the first important setback for the AKP. Overall, the party remained dominant in the political system, but it lost eight Kurdish provinces to the DTP. Compared to both the 2004 local elections and the 2007 general election, a picture of electoral retreat can be noted from the AKP. These last general elections of 2007 coincided with a rise in PKK activity, provoking a reaction from the government. By 2009, the fight against the PKK

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<sup>9</sup> H.A. Ünver, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question: Discourse and politics since 1990*, Routledge: Oxon 2015, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> Ö.K. Pusane, ‘Turkey’s Kurdish Opening: Long Awaited Achievements and Failed Expectations’, *Turkish Studies*, no. 1 (2014), p. 85.

had undermined the PKK's popularity in the Kurdish provinces.<sup>11</sup> The elections outcomes clearly demonstrated the influence of identity politics. The voting results ran parallel along the Turkish-Kurdish ethnic cleavage and were distributed between the AKP and DTP. In the provinces where the Kurdish ethnicity is significant, no other party than the AKP or DTP received any significant votes. While obtaining the second and third number of votes nationally, the CHP and MHP only received around 2% of the votes in these regions, making the east and southeast the battleground between the AKP and DTP.<sup>12</sup>

The outcomes demonstrated that the AKP overlooked the importance of autonomy and identity in the minds of the Kurdish electorate, and in turn had overestimated the unifying role it had reserved for Islam. Öcalan tried to take advantage of the opportunity by drafting a 156-page long "roadmap for peace". Due to national security-reasons, the plan was not released until March 2011. But the AKP was faced with pressure to adapt to the situation, if it had any aspirations to regain the Kurdish vote. Erdoğan decided to take control of the situation and initiate a peace process that started with the Kurdish Opening and the parallel Oslo Peace Talks.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Çarkoğlu, 'The March 2009 Local Elections in Turkey: A signal for Takers or the Inevitable Beginning of the End for AKP?', *South European Society and Politics*, no. 3 (2009), p. 297.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, p.310.

## **Chapter 2: From Reconciliation to Warfare**

### **2.1. The Kurdish Opening: 2009-2011**

After the 2009 local elections, the situation appeared favorable to promising developments regarding Kurdish rights. At the end of July, Turkey's Interior Minister Beşir Atalay announced that the government was working on a plan that would make the Kurds "equal and free" citizens of the republic by tackling problems with democratic reforms. The Minister stated that the plan would draw lessons from the past in order to save the future. The "determined and courageous" plan would be based on the ideas of intellectuals, NGO's, trade unions, media and opposition in order to provide a solution by strengthening and widen democratic rights.<sup>13</sup> The statement was significant because it showed a shift in discourse. Ankara no longer appeared to frame the issue as just a security issue or in socioeconomic terms, but framed it in a discourse of democracy and human rights as the basic principles needed to solve the Kurdish issue. The period that followed is referred to as the Kurdish Opening.

The need for equality was needed because until that time, Kurds had in fact been treated unequally on a number of issues. An example of one such inequality was the treatment by police. Research by Atak and Bayram shows that of the more than 10,000 protests that took place in Turkey between the years 2000 and 2009, pro-Kurdish protests were significantly more likely to face police intervention. In addition, compared to other protests the police acted more repressively in terms of force and arrests. Lastly, their research also demonstrated that police intervention was harsher during times that the PKK conflict intensified.<sup>14</sup>

Both Erdoğan and Öcalan showed their good will within the framework of the Kurdish Opening. With regards to the initiative, Erdoğan stated: "democratization is considered as the antidote for terrorism, ethnic extremism and all types of discrimination. The main approach here is that no matter where a person lives and from which ethnic origin he/she comes from, they

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<sup>13</sup> T. Seibert, 'Equal and free' plan for Kurds in Turkey', <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/equal-and-free-plan-for-kurds-in-turkey-1.549108>, accessed on 20-09-2017.

<sup>14</sup> K. Atak and I.E. Bayram, 'Protest Policing alla Turca: Threat, Insurgency, and the repression of Pro-Kurdish Protests in Turkey', *Social Forces*, no. 4 (2017), pp. 1683-1684.

should all feel themselves as equal and liberal citizens of our country.”<sup>15</sup> The Kurdish Opening never reached full concretization in its details, but was aimed at renaming some Kurdish cities to their original Kurdish names, granting amnesty to PKK fighters, allowing courses in Kurdish at schools and a possible amendment of the constitution to redefine Turkish citizenship. However, in practice the results remained limited.<sup>16</sup> One of the main outcomes of the Kurdish initiative was the creation of TRT-6; a state owned television channel that aired in the Kurdish language.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore in June 2012, a concession was introduced that Erdoğan himself described as an “historic step”; The Kurdish language was allowed to be taught at Turkish schools as an elective course, if students expressed enough interest for it. University-level Kurdish language courses, together with other minority languages, had already been introduced in 2009.<sup>18</sup>

On the Kurdish side, Öcalan called on PKK militants to return to Turkey. When 34 militants and their family members were given amnesty after crossing the border into Turkey from northern-Iraq through the Habur border checkpoint, the gesture was believed to be a breakthrough in the disarmament of the PKK and within the overall peace process. The gesture however turned sour when the DTP turned it into a show of force, by encouraging thousands of Kurds to celebrate the return of the militants at the Habur border. The heroic welcome with Öcalan posters and Kurdish flags on the televised news and front-pages of newspapers did not play well with the Turkish electorate and political parties. The Kurdish Opening suffered a severe blow by the DTP’s action, which ended the first attempt at reconciliation. Despite being frustrated, Erdoğan reacted remarkably calm by asking: "Tell me, is this sincere? How can those who want true peace do a [show of force] like this? Is this a scene fitting responsible people?" The establishment appeared less calm, as the Constitutional Court unanimously decided to close the DTP in

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<sup>15</sup> Ö. Aytaç, ‘The Democratic Initiative and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey since 2009’, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, no. 1 (2010), p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Ö.K. Pusane, ‘Turkey’s Kurdish Opening: Long Awaited Achievements and Failed Expectations’, *Turkish Studies*, no. 1 (2014), p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> Ö. Aytaç, ‘The Democratic Initiative and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey since 2009’, p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> BBC, ‘Kurdish can be taught in Turkey’s schools, Erdogan says’, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18410596>, accessed on 25-09-2017.

December 2009.<sup>19</sup> The government did not abandon the initiative, but had to pause their plans until the temper of the outraged Turkish citizens simmered down. In secret, the government held talks in Oslo with the PKK.

The democratic initiative was a dual process, consisting of public democratic reforms and secret peace talks with the PKK and KCK in Oslo. In the peace talks, the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) acted on behalf of the government, while representatives of the newly established pro-Kurdish party Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) acted as an intermediary on the Kurdish side. However, the talks conducted by Turkey's head of National Intelligence, Hakan Fidan, came to an abrupt end when an audiotape of the talks leaked to the press in 2011.<sup>20</sup>

The talks were a sensitive issue since under the existing Turkish laws, since the talks between the MIT and the PKK terrorist organization could technically be classified as a criminal offence. When the negotiations became public, MIT officials were brought in for questioning by the prosecutors. In order to protect themselves and the peace talks, the government passed an amendment to the existing legislation. Under the new legislation, approval of investigations against a MIT-chief was placed under the authority of the prime minister. When the prosecutors called for a second questioning of Fidan in 2013, Erdoğan refused to give his approval for the interrogation.<sup>21</sup>

Seven years later, in 2016, former MIT-official Emre Taner claimed that the process was sabotaged by foreign powers and the FETÖ movement. During an investigation of the July 15 coup attempt, Taner stated: "We started the Oslo talks to prevent foreign powers from using the PKK as a tool. Many of them are in affiliation with the terrorist group." He claims that Gülenists were disturbed about the Oslo talks, because it could end in a victory in the form of peace for Erdoğan's government. Therefore, with the intention of letting the peace process fail, FETÖ would have leaked the audiotape of the talks between

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<sup>19</sup> H.A. Ünver, *Turkey's Kurdish Question: Discourse and politics since 1990*, Routledge: New York 2015, p. 161.

<sup>20</sup> F. Tastekin, 'AKP seeks to 'legalize' PKK peace talks', <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/tastekin-legal-turkey-peace-process-kurds-pkk-akp-erdogan.html>, accessed on 25-09-2017.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

MIT officials and senior KCK and PKK members.<sup>22</sup>

By June 2011, the democratic initiative had officially failed and come to an end without any notable results. The collapse of the peace talks was followed by an eruption of PKK violence. Nevertheless, a foundation had been laid down for further steps in the future.

## **2.2. The Solution Process: 2012-2015**

Several factors indicated that the absence of a peace process was not in the AKP's interests. Therefore, the Kurdish opening was revived with the "Solution Process" in December 2012. The first factor of influence was the intensification of PKK operations, which were conducted by hit-and-run attacks from across the border in northern-Iraq. In the 14 months prior to the 2012 Solution Process, victimization had risen sharply to more than 700 deaths as a result of the accelerated war between the PKK and the government security forces. The conflict grew to such intensity that kidnappings, suicide bombings and terrorist attacks by the PKK had become widespread.<sup>23</sup> Aside from the human sufferance, it is no secret that Turkey sees a large political role for itself in the Middle East. In order to achieve this position, a stable domestic environment is fundamental. Second was the pressure from the Turkish public, which realized the conflict couldn't be solved by just military solutions. Third, was the AKP's realization that it had lost popularity among a large percentage of Kurdish voters. By making an effort to reconcile with the Kurds, the AKP hoped to regain these votes for the local and presidential elections of 2014. Lastly was the fact that Öcalan was still strongly influential among the Kurdish population of Turkey. With the acceptance that there was no way around the PKK leader, the AKP changed their attitude towards Öcalan and started negotiations with him directly.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Daily Sabah, 'Gülenists sabotaged reconciliation process with the PKK, former Turkish official says', <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/11/09/gulenists-sabotaged-reconciliation-process-with-the-pkk-former-turkish-intelligence-official-says>, accessed on 25-09-2017.

<sup>23</sup> N. Kiraç, 'From Turkish prison, Kurdish leader tells followers to lay down their arms', <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/29/middleeast/turkey-kurdish-leader-pkk/index.html>, accessed on 25-09-2017.

<sup>24</sup> S.F. Larrabee, 'Turkey's New Kurdish Opening', *Survival*, no. 5 (2013), pp. 136-137.

The negotiations started off promising when in March 2013 a ceasefire was reached and Öcalan called on PKK fighters to withdraw from Turkey. Öcalan opined that it was time to abandon the violent struggle and initiate a political trajectory by stating: "Now it is time for our armed units to move across the border [to northern Iraq]. This is not an end but a new beginning. This is not abandoning the struggle, but a start to a different struggle." Erdoğan welcomed the initiative by announcing that the Turkish security forces wouldn't conduct any operations against the PKK as long as Öcalan's call was implemented.<sup>25</sup> In May of that year, a small number of PKK militants withdrew from Turkey, with the promise of further retreat in the future. Nevertheless, the negotiations appeared to lead to no result as the negotiations gradually lost political momentum, due to the unwillingness from both sides to make the concessions necessary to reach compromises.<sup>26</sup>

A part of the process was supposed to be played by the appointed committee of "wise men". The committee was comprised of 63 (pro-government) "wise men and women", personally selected or approved by Erdoğan. Among them were academics, journalists, artists, authors and NGO-representatives who were knowledgeable about the issue. The members were equally divided across seven Turkish geographical regions and had the assignment to promote the peace process as formulated and implemented by Erdoğan for the duration of two months, by meeting with civil society and organizing meetings to inform the people about the benefits of the peace process. The goal was to ease the concerns of those in Turkish society who could fear the consequences of a Turkish-Kurdish rapprochement.<sup>27</sup>

The AKP's sincerity and dedication to the Solution Process was tested by an important external development that would have large consequences for Turkey internally. Due to Kobani's proximity to the Turkish border, many

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<sup>25</sup> J. Reynolds, 'Turkey Kurds: PKK chief Ocalan calls for ceasefire',

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21874427>, accessed on 27-09-2017

<sup>26</sup> S.F. Larrabee, 'Turkey and the Changing Dynamics of the Kurdish Issue', *Survival*, no. 2 (2016), p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> K. Gursel, 'Erdoğan Asks 'Wise People' to Make Case for Peace', <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/erdogan-wise-people-commission-peace-process.html>, accessed on 27-09-2017.

Turkish-Kurds have relatives across the border in Syria. Therefore when the Siege of Kobani was launched by ISIL in September 2014, Turkish-Kurds called for government intervention and rushed to aid the Syrian-Kurds. The Turkish government however denied these people passage, refusing to strengthen the Rojava region and the YPG, which the AKP considers an army of terrorists. To the Kurds this inaction demonstrated that the government was not truly dedicated to the peace process and was still out to suppress the Kurdish political movement. Furthermore, it enhanced the idea among Kurds that Ankara secretly, or at least indirectly, supported ISIL.<sup>28</sup> Tensions deriving from the government's inaction culminated into wide scale protests in the southeast from 6 to 8 October 2014 and a resurgence of PKK violence. As a result, more than 40 people lost their lives in one week.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the rising tensions and lowered expectations, many still hoped for a breakthrough in the Kurdish issue. For a short period, such a breakthrough appeared to be approaching, when on the 28th of February 2015, three HDP-deputies met with Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan and Minister of Interior Efkân Ala at Istanbul's Dolmabahçe Palace to come to a long-term solution to end fighting between the PKK and the government. The two parties came to an agreement and established a roadmap for peace based on ten points, which they revealed in a joint statement. The understanding became known as the Dolmabahçe agreement.<sup>30</sup>

The Dolmabahçe agreement took a hard hit however, when on the 15th of March 2015, Erdoğan turned back the clock by claiming that Turkey didn't have a Kurdish problem anymore, stating that there were no differences between the rights of Turkish-Kurds and other Turkish citizens. During his speech, he reframed his 2005 Diyarbakır speech that had given high hopes for

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<sup>28</sup> E.M. Resch, 'Syria's Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey', *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, no. 17 (2017), pp. 1-20. or <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/new-turkey-pkk-peace-talks-inevitability-postponed>, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Amnesty International, *Kobani Protests in Turkey: Human rights failures*, London: Amnesty International Ltd. 2015, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Daily Sabah, 'Erdoğan renounces Dolmabahçe declaration, says HDP should try its best for PKK's disarmament', <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/07/17/erdogan-renounces-dolmabahce-declaration-says-hdp-should-try-its-best-for-pkks-disarmament>, accessed on 20-09-2017.

many in Turkish society and abroad; “We resolved this issue in my speech in 2005 in Diyarbakır. My Kurdish citizens may have problems but he or she has problems as much as Turkish citizens have,” Erdoğan expressed. According to the President, Kurds are active in all levels of society, including the government, as the highest-level officials and in the Turkish Armed Forces. Erdoğan assured his public that the government had done everything for the development of the Kurdish region by eliminating all denialist and assimilationist policies and investing in roads, airports and other infrastructure. “For God’s sake, what don’t you have that we have?” Ironically, his speech contradicted the entire existence of a resolution process on the Kurdish issue.<sup>31</sup>

The turbulent events required a clear response from the HDP, as rumours got around that the HDP was bargaining with the AKP about HDP-support for the adoption of a presidential system in exchange for a solution to the Kurdish problem. Two days after Erdoğan’s denial of the Kurdish issue, Demirtaş explicitly denied those allegations by stating that the HDP would never work with the AKP on such a “dirty deal” and addressed Erdoğan by saying that “as long as HDP members will breath, you won’t be president.” The highlight of the speech was the phrase *seni başkan yaptırmayacağız* (we will not make you president), which Demirtaş repeated three times under a thunderous applause from his fellow party members.<sup>32</sup>

Despite an ongoing resolution process of approximately two years, the AKP and HDP were diametrically opposed to each other. The Turkish government had made no significant concessions to the country’s Kurds and the Siege of Kobani demonstrated that the peace process had not yet built sufficient trust with neither the PKK nor the HDP. Some academics mark Demirtaş’ statement of March 17 as the end of the solution process. However, officially

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<sup>31</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, ‘What more do Kurds want, Erdogan asks’, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?PageID=238&NID=79720>, accessed on 13-09-2017.

<sup>32</sup> Halkların Demokratik Partisi – HDP, ‘#SeniBaşkanYaptırmayacağız’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITHB4H69Ako>, accessed on 12-09-2017.

the peace process was still ongoing and the differences between the camps would only become greater after the June elections.

### 2.3 The 2015 elections and the breakdown of the solution process

The Turkish elections of June 7 wouldn't only determine who would form the government for the following four years; they would also reveal if the AKP would reach the minimally necessary 330 seats needed to put forward a referendum on constitutional change. An even better option for Erdoğan would be to obtain 367 seats, or two-thirds of the total of 550 seats, which would allow the President to amend the constitution without issuing a referendum. In the case of a "yes" as the outcome, the referendum would result in the transformation of the political system from a parliamentary system to an executive presidential system. The most debated change was the granting of executive powers to the president. These powers would allow Erdoğan to take on the role of head of state, head of government and leader of the largest party.

In this election, the HDP occupied an important position. The Turkish political system requires parties to reach a threshold of ten percent in order to enter Parliament. If the HDP would fail to reach this threshold, its seats would be transferred to the parties that did pass the threshold. However, if the HDP would be able to reach the ten percent, the AKP would be unlikely to obtain the required number of seats needed to change the constitution without coalescing with at least one opposition party. Therefore, the political battlegrounds were Turkey's Kurdish inhabited regions of the southeast and east.

Knowing that the HDP would refuse to cooperate with the AKP, and given the fact that the party would benefit from a poor result by the HDP, the AKP started a smear campaign against the HDP by stating that it couldn't dissociate itself from PKK violence. It also accused the HDP of exercising threats of violence through the PKK on civilians in order to receive votes.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> M. Bardakci, '2015 parliamentary elections in Turkey: demise and revival of AKP's single-party rule', *Turkish Studies*, no. 1 (2016), p. 7.

AKP Diyarbakır deputy candidate Alaattin Parlak claimed that the HDP feared not to reach the ten percent threshold. Therefore voters in the region would have been under serious threats, being pressured into voting HDP.<sup>34</sup> Daily Sabah reported that citizens in the Kurdish populated regions of Turkey's southeast received threatening letters from the PKK, with the text: "If anyone in your family votes for the AK Party or other parties, you will face the harsh consequences of it."<sup>35</sup> Lastly, the AKP attacked the HDP's liberal secular character. By criticizing the HDP's calls to dismantle the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) it tried to attract the more conservative Kurds.<sup>36</sup>

Despite its efforts, the June 2015 elections didn't go as planned for the AKP, since only 258 seats were obtained. This corresponds to a drop of 9% compared to the 2011 results, in which the AKP won 327 seats. The big winner was the HDP, which managed to increase its votes in every region and especially the eastern and southeastern regions, where it became the largest party. By winning 13.1% (80 seats), the party saw its votes double compared to 2011, when it obtained 6.6% of the vote (or 35 seats). The AKP suffered the most in the eastern and southeastern regions. Whereas support from the predominantly Kurdish inhabited areas was almost half of the total number of votes in 2011, it dropped to a dramatic one-third in 2015. A game changer was the loss of support from the conservative Kurds, who had previously been loyal to the AKP. Nevertheless, these pious Kurds realized that the solution process hadn't resulted into anything tangible.<sup>37</sup>

In the inter-elections period, the solution process suffered even more as the contrast between the AKP and HDP increased. The HDP upheld its anti-Erdoğan rhetoric, in line with what it had preached during its election campaign and ruled out the possibility of forming a coalition with the AKP. An

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<sup>34</sup> S. Alkan, 'Deputy candidates criticize PKK threats for locals to vote for HDP', <https://www.dailysabah.com/elections/2015/05/28/deputy-candidates-criticize-pkk-threats-for-locals-to-vote-for-hdp>, accessed on 14-09-2017.

<sup>35</sup> A. Sahin, 'PKK threatens locals in southeast Turkey, urges them to vote for HDP', <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/05/20/pkk-threatens-locals-in-southeast-turkey-urges-them-to-vote-for-hdp>, accessed on 14-09-2017.

<sup>36</sup> M. Bardakci, '2015 parliamentary elections in Turkey: demise and revival of AKP's single-party rule', *Turkish Studies*, no. 1 (2016), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*, p. 7-10.

opposition coalition was also ruled out, since the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) refused any coalition with the HDP. MHP chairman Devlet Bahçeli, who was labelled “Mr. No” after the June elections for turning down all coalition offers, claimed to refuse due to the will of his constituency.<sup>38</sup> After AKP coalition talks with the Republican People’s Party (CHP) in July, and MHP in August failed, new elections were scheduled for the first of November 2015. For the November elections, the AKP was determined to regain the cross-over votes from the nationalist-conservatives, who had voted for the MHP in the June elections. The party had been successful in gaining 3.3% more votes than in 2011. To halt the cross-over votes, Erdoğan abandoned the solution process.

This abandonment of the solution process was clearly expressed shortly after the election in July when Erdoğan spoke out against the Dolmabahçe agreement. After accusing the HDP of having received help from the PKK during the June elections, the President stated: “I, by no means accept the expression of Dolmabahçe Accord.” Stressing that if a step should be taken regarding the future of the country, it should be taken in Parliament and not with the HDP, who “lean their backs on the separatist terrorist organization.”<sup>39</sup> This point is a second instance where one can argue that the solution process terminated. In fact, Erdoğan himself argued that the solution had been damaged so much (by the HDP) that he did not think it would be possible to carry it on and there was no turning back. Despite the AKP’s sincere efforts, the HDP had “exploited the process” and used it to target Turkey’s national unity and brotherhood, according to the President. And not only was the HDP to blame, they should also suffer the consequences. Although Erdoğan claims not to believe in closing down parties, he did think the administrators should pay the price individually. Therefore, he started

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<sup>38</sup> Y. Paksoy, ‘CHP, MHP and HDP destined to remain in opposition’, <https://www.dailysabah.com/elections/2015/11/03/chp-mhp-and-hdp-destined-to-remain-in-opposition>, accessed on 16-09-2017.

<sup>39</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, ‘President Erdogan Performs Eid Prayer at Mimar Sinan Mosque’, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/32937/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-bayram-namazini-mimar-sinan-camiinde-kildi.html>, accessed on 13-09-2017.

calling for the lifting of political immunities in order to make them pay for cooperating with -and relying on- the terrorist PKK.<sup>40</sup>

The coalition talks took place amid a period in which tensions rose quickly as a result of revived violence between the PKK and the government. On the 20th of July, an ISIL suicide bomber struck in the southeastern Turkish city of Suruç, killing 32 activists who gathered to discuss the rebuilding of Kobani. In the hours after the attack, Kurdish protesters' frustration however directed itself towards the state in nationwide protests. Across the country, Kurdish and leftist youth took to the streets to protest the government, which was believed to have aided ISIL while neglecting the Syrian Kurds. The PKK "retaliated" two days later by killing two police officers in Şanlıurfa's Ceylanpınar district.<sup>41</sup> The Turkish government responded by launching operations against both ISIL and the PKK within Turkey and across the border in Syria and Iraq.<sup>42</sup>

The events in July made an end to all doubts on whether the peace process was still alive. The successful ceasefire that had been imposed on March 2013, had come to an end and attacks on targets such as police and military personnel rose quickly.<sup>43</sup> Both sides are still suffering greatly in the absence of a ceasefire and an ongoing peace process. In the southeastern town of Cizre, a 24-hour curfew was imposed for the duration of 78 days, between December 2015 and March 2016, in order to facilitate the military campaign against the PKK. The operation was devastating for the predominantly Kurdish citizens,

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<sup>40</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 'It is not possible to carry on the Solution Process with those, who target our national unity and brotherhood', <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/en/news/542/33990/it-is-not-possible-to-carry-on-the-solution-process-with-those-who-target-our-national-unity-and-brotherhood.html>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

<sup>41</sup> Anadolu Agency, 'Turkey: 24 people wounded in protests after Suruc attack', <http://aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-24-people-wounded-in-protests-after-suruc-attack/23462>, accessed on 15-09-2017.

<sup>42</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, 'Turkish airstrikes target ISIL in Syria', <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkish-airstrikes-target-isil-in-syria.aspx?pageID=238&nID=85853&NewsCatID=352>, accessed on 13-09-2017.

<sup>43</sup> K.K.K. Ser, 'These three charts will help you understand Turkey's recent terrorist attacks', <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-06-30/these-three-charts-will-help-you-understand-turkeys-recent-terrorist-attacks>, accessed on 14-09-2017.

as 10,000 homes were destroyed and around 200 civilians lost their lives.<sup>44</sup> The curfew in Cizre was not a singular event. From mid-August 2015 to mid-August 2016, at least 252 24-hour curfews were imposed in the Kurdish areas.<sup>45</sup> A 2017 report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the human rights situation in southeast Turkey, revealed that some 2000 people were killed in the Kurdish southeast in 18 months of fighting after the ceasefire ended, as a result of the fight between the PKK and government's security forces. The report accuses the Turkish security forces of violating human rights. Furthermore, between 350,000 and half a million people were displaced as a result of the conflict between July 2015 and December 2016. According to the organization, the security forces respond to the PKK's kidnappings, killings and acts of terrorism by intensifying their military operations by using disproportionate security measures, while abusing the state of emergency that was introduced after the July 15 coup. The OHCHR claims that the rights derogated from the state of emergency are used to target Kurdish civilians who dissent and political opposition parties in the southeast. It has particular concerns over the large-scale dismissals of public officials, the arrests of HDP-members and municipal mayors of the Kurdish areas, and the restricted access to the justice system. Moreover, almost all local and national Kurdish media outlets have been shut down and many of its journalists have been arrested.<sup>46</sup> By October 2016, Ankara had closed down 23 predominantly pro-Kurdish TV-channels and radio stations, on charges of spreading terrorist propaganda. One of the TV-channels was a station that catered to children, airing cartoons such as The Smurfs in the Kurdish language.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> T. Stevenson, 'Unprecedented destruction of Kurdish city of Cizre', <http://www.dw.com/en/unprecedented-destruction-of-kurdish-city-of-cizre/a-19265927>, accessed on 14-09-2017.

<sup>45</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, 'At least 252 curfews declared in Turkey in last two years', <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/at-least-252-curfews-declared-in-turkey-in-last-two-years-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=116957&NewsCatID=341>, accessed on 15-09-2017.

<sup>46</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey', [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR\\_South-East\\_TurkeyReport\\_10March2017.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf), accessed on 16-09-2017.

<sup>47</sup> C. Letsch, 'What about our human rights?'; Kurds feel force of Turkey's crackdown', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/06/what-about-our-human-rights-kurds-feel-force-turkeys-crackdown>, accessed on 16-09-2017.

In the run up to the November elections, the AKP successfully managed to portray itself as the only party strong enough to counter the terrorism in the country. The AKP took advantage of the heightened threats emanating from the PKK, the TAK and ISIL, while attacking the HDP. The HDP was targeted for not being able to prevent the surging PKK violence and was accused of being incapable of ending the Kurdish issue. This time, the HDP had a harder time getting their message across. At a pro-Kurdish and labour activists rally in Ankara, two ISIL-suicide bombers killed 109 people and left more than 500 wounded, making it the bloodiest single attack in Turkey's history.<sup>48</sup> In the aftermath of the attack, access to social media was restricted for the Turkish public and the government censored news coverage of the terror attack. Selahattin Demirtaş criticized the policy and accused the AKP of being behind the attack in cooperation with ISIL.<sup>49</sup> The inter-election period saw an overall increase in attacks against HDP election bureaus and members, which forced the HDP to cancel ten major election rallies. In addition, HDP-members were also targeted by the AKP for their alleged affiliations with the PKK. More than 5000 HDP members were taken into custody on the suspicion of being part of an illegal organization, of which 1004 were charged. Lastly, the HDP was also undermined by the PKK. As the party called for reconciliation and a new ceasefire, the outburst of violence by the PKK dealt a severe hit to the HDP's legitimacy.<sup>50</sup>

In the meantime, it had become fully clear that the AKP had repositioned itself and steered away from its previous path regarding the Kurdish question. After the failure to achieve of winning a majority in the June election, the AKP has changed its rhetoric of reconciliation with the PKK. Instead, it downplayed its own role in the Kurdish problem and started to blame the PKK and HDP. Whereas the government tries to provide the Kurdish regions with the same services as the rest of the country, the PKK holds back development

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<sup>48</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, 'At least 275 killed in ISIL, PKK terror attacks in Turkey in 2016', <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/at-least-275-killed-in-isil-pkk-terror-attacks-in-turkey-in-2016.aspx?pageID=238&nID=107145&NewsCatID=509>, accessed on 15-09-2017.

<sup>49</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, 'HDP co-chair blames AKP government for Ankara bombings', <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hdp-co-chair-blames-akp-government-for-ankara-bombings.aspx?pageID=238&nID=89930&NewsCatID=338>, accessed on 15-09-2017.

<sup>50</sup> M. Bardakci, '2015 parliamentary elections in Turkey: demise and revival of AKP's single-party rule', *Turkish Studies*, no. 1 (2016), p. 14-15.

and investment in the region. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım expressed: “We have been suffering from terrorism for many years. In reality there is no Kurdish problem in Turkey. Kurds have a terror problem with the PKK. This problem holds us back in all areas. Works in the region are delayed, investments are delayed. Who is suffering? Our citizens living there are suffering.” According to the AKP, the Kurdish problem should be replaced by “terror problem”.<sup>51</sup>

The tumultuous period and events after the June elections resulted in a landslide victory by the AKP in the November elections by receiving 49.5% of the vote, equating to 317 seats. The HDP saw its votes decrease from 13.1% in June to 10.8%. Research by Aysegul Aydin and Cem Emrence argues that the HDP did not lose its support as a direct consequence of resurrected PKK-violence. In fact, regions that were directly affected by attacks recorded the fewest losses for the HDP. With the media outlets at the AKP’s disposal, the AKP managed to utilize fears of insurgency in areas where no, or few, attacks had actually taken place. The research shows that the AKP managed to successfully mobilize voters (resulting in a higher turnout) in peaceful areas, while it simultaneously managed to attract the swing voters.<sup>52</sup>

After the AKP’s victory it did not scale back its accusing language at the address of the PKK and HDP, and proceeded to take action. Aside from the before mentioned actions in Turkey’s southeast, it also launched an aggressive crackdown on the HDP members in parliament. In early November 2016, HDP co-leaders Demirtaş and Figen Yüksedağ were arrested on charges of links to terrorism and sent to prison. Along the co-chairs, 13 HDP MP’s were detained, of which eight ended up being sent to prison. Demirtaş has denied any association with the PKK and expressed to “reprehend violence and war in every way. I am against any politics that advocates war.” According to the

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<sup>51</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, ‘There is no Kurdish problem, just a PKK terror problem: Turkish PM’, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/there-is-no-kurdish-problem-just-a-pkk-terror-problem-turkish-pm.aspx?pageID=238&nID=104543&NewsCatID=338>, accessed on 13-09-2017.

<sup>52</sup> A. Aydin and C. Emrence, ‘How violence helped both Erdogan and his Kurdish opponents in Turkey’s elections’, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/06/03/how-violence-helped-both-erdogan-and-his-kurdish-opponents-in-turkeys-elections/?utm\\_term=.f1e70a407e7d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/06/03/how-violence-helped-both-erdogan-and-his-kurdish-opponents-in-turkeys-elections/?utm_term=.f1e70a407e7d), accessed on 15-09-2017.

HDP co-chair, the blame for the collapse of the peace process, and the violence that followed lays, completely with the government authorities who ended the process.<sup>53</sup>

The AKP upheld the strategy of demonizing opposition in its quest for obtaining a victory in the presidential referendum. Erdoğan and AKP-members framed naysayers as coup- and terrorist supporters.<sup>54</sup> In campaigning for *evet* (yes), an image was posted on Twitter by longtime mayor of Ankara and AKP member Melih Gökçek. The image demonstrated two sides; on the left the word *evet* accompanied images of Erdoğan and Yıldırım. The other side depicted Demirtaş together with suspected coup-plotter Fetullah Gülen and ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to the Ankara-mayor they represent the *hayır-side* (no-side).<sup>55</sup>

The referendum resulted in a tight win for the yes-camp (51.4%), resulting in the adoption of an executive presidential system. The result of the referendum showed the division between the rural areas and big cities, as the yes-vote did not prevail in Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara. The referendum didn't pass without any commotion. According to OSCE supervisor Alev Korun, as much as 2,5 million votes may have been manipulated. She stated that “the suspicions are of such serious nature that the outcome of the referendum might be different.” Once again, the southeast was the theatre of controversy, as two of her OSCE colleague-supervisors were hindered in doing their work.<sup>56</sup> Due to the many displacements as a consequence of the resurged fighting, the turnout in the southeast was significantly below the national average. Many of the displaced Kurds had not registered to vote in their new whereabouts. Another interesting matter was the number of invalid votes in the Kurdish areas,

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<sup>53</sup> Rudaw, ‘Demirtaş denies PKK links, holds president and PM responsible for bloodshed’, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/060120172>, accessed on 13-09-2017.

<sup>54</sup> T. Gumrukcu & David Dolan, ‘Erdoğan risks losing Turkish swing voters with harsh referendum rhetoric’, <http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-politics-referendum-polls-idUKKBN15V2BC>, accessed on 27-04-2017.

<sup>55</sup> P. Tremblay, ‘Turkey adopts Baghdadi as poster child for naysayers’, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/contents/articles/originals/2017/03/turkey-how-islamic-state-became-a-naysayer-referendum.html>, accessed on 27-04-2017.

<sup>56</sup> NOS, ‘OVSE-waarnemer: 2,5 miljoen Turkse stemmen verdacht’, <http://nos.nl/artikel/2168836-ovse-waarnemer-2-5-miljoen-turkse-stemmen-verdacht.html>, accessed on 21-04-2017.

numbering more than twice the usual for the region and being unrepeated anywhere else in Turkey. Perhaps most curious were the surprising yes-votes in HDP-strongholds where Erdoğan traditionally enjoyed little to no support. The yes votes came unexpected and later polls did not support the outcomes. Nevertheless, overall Turkey's southeastern provinces voted "no" with a margin of two to one.<sup>57</sup> Erdoğan managed to obtain his desired result, but the outcome made it terribly clear that he is leading a highly polarized country. The strategy of framing the Kurds in the southeast as PKK victims did not pay off, although it seems unlikely that the AKP expected it to do so, given the circumstances.

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<sup>57</sup> G.H. Jenkins, 'Turkey's Constitutional Referendum and Erdogan's Faded Democratic Credentials', <http://isdpeu/publication/turkeys-faded-democratic-credentials/>, accessed on 25-09-2017.

## **Chapter 3: Foreign Kurdish Policy**

### **3.1. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)**

After the military crackdown of 1980, the PKK fled to Syria, Lebanon and northern-Iraq, from where it conducted cross-border operations since 1984. The Turkish military responded by fighting the PKK guerillas through anti-PKK incursions in northern-Iraq. Throughout the 90s, these incursions were at the order of the day. In the fight against the PKK, the Turkish army made little distinction between regular Iraqi-Kurdish civilians and PKK forces. Besides fighting the PKK, the military also aimed at sabotaging a potential creation of an independent Kurdish state by the Iraqi-Kurds, who reached de-facto autonomy after the Gulf War in 1991. Turkish fears threatened to materialize after the U.S.-invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to the acceptance of the 2005 Iraqi constitution. The constitution formalized the KRG's status with the adoption of Iraq as a federalist state. Until early 2009, Ankara portrayed the KRG-President Masoud Barzani as a tribal leader who plotted against Turkey. Turkish military generals threatened the Iraqi-Kurds with war if they would attempt to obtain independence or take control of the province of Kirkuk. In return, Barzani expressed to defend Kurdistan from any Turkish invasion.<sup>58</sup> However, a change in policy occurred from 2007 onwards. The Turkish military managed to bring great losses to PKK training camps in the Qandil Mountains, which led to a diminished threat from northern-Iraq. It was from this time on that the AKP greatly transformed its relations with the KRG. Turkey accepted Kurdish autonomy and opened political and economic ties with the KRG.

A significant step in the establishment of political ties was President Gül's visit to Baghdad in 2009, where he met with Iraqi President –and founder of one of the main Kurdish parties; the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)- Jalal Talabani. At the meeting Talabani and Gül, in addition to signing a trade agreement, agreed on joining forces against the PKK in order to remove them from the Qandil Mountains. The meeting was significant because it signified the first time a Turkish president formally met with a KRG-member suspected

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<sup>58</sup> M.M.A. Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, p. 175.

of being a PKK-affiliate. From this point onwards Turkey's goal became the creation of a stable border region.<sup>59</sup> Turkey's new cooperation with the KRG was symbolized in May 2010, with the establishment of a Turkish consulate in the KRG's capital Erbil.

Since 2009, high government officials from the two sides have continued to meet repeatedly in order to further strengthen political and economic ties with great success. By early 2011, Turkey's workers, contractors and investors accounted for approximately 70% of the KRG's business. Erbil's main street was filled with Turkish shops and the two major Turkish banks were located in new modern buildings built by Turkish construction companies.<sup>60</sup> At the joint opening of Erbil International Airport by Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Barzani in 2011, Erdoğan stated: "Last year Turkey did more than \$7 billion worth of business in Iraq, and more than half of that with the northern provinces. There are more than 20,000 Turkish workers currently holding permits to work in Erbil governorate, and more than 35,000 if Dohuk and Suleimaniah are included."<sup>61</sup> Turkish economic activity in northern-Iraq continued to grow in the following years, whereas in 2010 around 730 Turkish firms were active in the northern-Iraq, that number rose to 1,023 in 2012.<sup>62</sup>

In 2012 the relationship between the two sides accelerated when an agreement was reached to build two oil pipelines and one gas-line directly from the KRG to Turkey, circumventing Iraq's central government.<sup>63</sup> In May 2014, the KRG announced that "Kurdish oil" had reached the Turkish city Ceyhan through the newly constructed pipeline, and was heading towards the international market for the first time in history.<sup>64</sup> And the energy project hasn't stopped there. Currently the company Genel Energy is holding talks

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<sup>59</sup> M.M.A. Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, p. 176.

<sup>60</sup> *Idem*, pp. 180-181.

<sup>61</sup> KRG Cabinet, 'President Barzani and Prime Minister Erdogan op Erbil International Airport and Turkish Consulate', <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?r=223&l=12&s=02010100&a=39389&s=010000>, accessed on 04-09-2017.

<sup>62</sup> N. Tocci, 'Turkey's Kurdish Gamble', *The International Spectator*, nr. 3 (2013), pp. 68-69.

<sup>63</sup> *Idem*, p. 69.

<sup>64</sup> KRG Cabinet, 'KRG statement on first oil sales through pipeline export', <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&a=51589>, accessed on 04-09-2017.

with investors, including a state-owned Turkish energy company, to develop a 350-kilometer pipeline from the Kurdish-Iraqi Miran and Bina Bawi gasfields to the Turkish borders.<sup>65</sup>

So does the improvement of political and economic ties, combined with a mutually beneficial energy cooperation signify a happy marriage? I argue that it does not for a couple of reasons: the fight against the PKK, looming Kurdish independence and finally the incorporation of Kirkuk into the KRG.

Ever since the 90s, the KRG has offered to help Turkey in its fight against the PKK in north-Iraq. Plans to expel the PKK from the region have especially taken form after the reconciliation between the two sides in 2009. Nevertheless, in many meetings that followed between top officials, the Turkish side has complained about a lack of effort on the Kurdish-Iraqi side in fighting the PKK. Through actions and words, it has become clear that Barzani prefers soft power over hard power. While explicitly denouncing the PKK, he sees it as his duty to stop violence between all concerned parties. Barzani seeks to maintain stability in the region and opines that no matter how much might and technology one has, it won't be effective against guerilla warfare. To great dissatisfaction of Davutoğlu, who demanded an active approach in the fight against the PKK, Barzani expressed in November 2011: "We understand the Turkish military is a strong, capable army, but who do you fight with? It is not a frontal war."<sup>66</sup> A month later, Human Rights Watch reported on indiscriminate attacks against the PKK and Kurdish-Iraqi civilians, reporting at least a hundred civilian deaths and thousands being displaced.<sup>67</sup> Reasons for the indiscriminate attacks may be to force the KRG to take an active stance against the PKK, or as renowned consultant and researcher Dr. Azad Aslan claims; to prevent the Kurds from reaching stability.

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<sup>65</sup> A. Ward, 'Turkey spots political advantage to investing in northern Iraq's gasfields', <https://www.ft.com/content/cca0016a-49e0-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43>, accessed on 04-09-2017.

<sup>66</sup> C. Çamlıbel, 'Barzani snubs calls for anti-PKK strikes', <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/barzani-snubs-calls-for-anti-pkk-strikes.aspx?pageID=238&nID=7200&NewsCatID=338>, accessed on 04-09-2017.

<sup>67</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Iran/Turkey: Recent Attacks on Civilians in Iraqi Kurdistan', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/12/20/iran/turkey-recent-attacks-civilians-iraqi-kurdistan>, accessed on 04-09-2017.

Reacting to the 2011 intervention, Aslan claims that the PKK was used as a scapegoat to intervene in the KRG's internal affairs: "Because of its rich oil and natural gas reserves and its geo-strategic position, Kurdistan touches raw nerves in several countries." According to Aslan there was no chance that Turkey bombarded the region for the sole purpose of fighting the PKK. Supposedly during the period of self-administration, the KRG proved it was better at running its own affairs than those who mismanaged Kurdistan. Therefore, Turkey would try to destabilize the region and feed an internal conflict among the Kurds in order to prevent the KRG from achieving statehood, according to the analyst.<sup>68</sup>

In September 2016, Aslan's claims could be put to the test when head of the KRG's Department of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa Bakir, criticized Baghdad's idea of a "genuine partnership", claiming that for them it meant the "subordination and subjugation of the Kurdistan Region." While stressing that Baghdad would remain an important partner and the KRG wanted to maintain friendly ties, Bakir stressed that the Kurds needed sovereignty: "We are suffering from lack of sovereignty. Because we are sub-sovereign, we cannot borrow money, we cannot enter deals with sovereign countries, we cannot print money, we cannot devalue money, we are not present at anti-ISIS coalition conferences, we are not present at humanitarian [meetings] because we are sub-sovereign. At the UN, we don't attend. So, the point is that we need sovereignty."<sup>69</sup> In March 2017, KRG spokesperson Safeen Diyazee explained Turkish daily *Hürriyet* the steps the KRG would take in its "amicable divorce". The first step would be to enter serious conversations with Baghdad before anybody else. The second step should be to enter negotiations with its neighbouring countries and convince them that an independent Kurdistan is not a threat to their stability and security. The spokesperson reassures that the quest for independence is limited to the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan alone and

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<sup>68</sup> A. Aslan, 'Kurdistan Parliament should act', *The Kurdish Globe*, no. 319, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> G. Field, 'Kurdish foreign minister: 'We are suffering from lack of sovereignty'', <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/170920165>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

that there are no ambitions across the borders in Turkey, Iran or Syria. Simply said, it doesn't want to set an example for the Kurds in the Middle East.<sup>70</sup>

Kurdish calls for sovereignty officially materialized on the 7th of June 2017, when Barzani announced the date for a referendum on Kurdish independence. On the 25th of September 2017, the people of the three Kurdish areas - Makhmour, Sinjar and Khanaqin- and the disputed region of Kirkuk would cast their vote on the question "do you want an independent Kurdistan?"<sup>71</sup>

Despite the Kurdish assurances, Turkey doesn't approve of the Kurdish referendum claiming that the disintegration of Iraq would cause a threat to the country and region's security. In August 2017, Turkish presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalın explicitly stated that the Turkish opposition to the referendum is not a result of "a negative attitude towards the Iraqi Kurds, the Syrian Kurds or other Kurds in the region," and that Erdoğan is not "against and upset by the Kurds' achievements," reaffirming that the basic reason is that Iraq's territorial and political integrity must be preserved. Nevertheless, some threatening language was used by the spokesperson, stating that there will be consequences if Erbil doesn't back down from the referendum. Without going into specifics about the consequences, the spokesperson warned the Kurds that none of its neighbors would recognize a unilateral independence.<sup>72</sup>

In an official press release issued by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey expressed its concerns about the need to maintain stability in the country. The Ministry states that in a time with such tumultuous developments, neither Iraq nor the KRG would benefit from Kurdish independence. Instead, it would only cause further instability. Furthermore it states that preserving the political unity and territorial integrity of Iraq is one

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<sup>70</sup> Rudaw, 'KRG to reassure neighbours a Kurdish state won't threaten security, stability', <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/310320172>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

<sup>71</sup> M. Chmaytelli, 'Iraqi Kurds plan independence referendum on Sept. 25', <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/iraqi-kurds-plan-independence-referendum-on-sept-25-idUSKBN18Y284>, accessed on 06-09-2017.

<sup>72</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 'We Don't Want War Anywhere in the World', <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/82196/we-dont-want-war-anywhere-in-the-world.html>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

of the fundamental principles of Turkey's Iraq policy. Turkey sees the fight against ISIL and the humanitarian crisis that followed, as Iraq's main challenge. The only way to "recover from the profound humanitarian, political, economic and social devastation that DEASH has inflicted and to achieve lasting stability by thoroughly rebuilding the country," is to engage in dialogue and inclusiveness.<sup>73</sup> Neglect of engaging in this dialogue and inclusiveness could even lead to a civil war, according to Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. While reaffirming that Turkey doesn't have any problems with the KRG itself, he warns for the country's security stating that the country which is already experiencing a lot of problems, could face a civil war in the case the referendum goes through.<sup>74</sup>

The Kirkuk Province is an issue of debate between the KRD and Turkey. The Kirkuk province is located in the north of Iraq, on the border of Iraq proper and Kurdish-Iraq. While it is officially part of the central government, there is a lot of debate on whether the region belongs to the KRG or the central government. When the United States entered Iraq in 2003 and militarily occupied the country, a new constitution was adopted in 2005. Article 140 stipulated that the administrative statuses of disputed Kurdish areas should be determined by referendum on whether or not they would like to join the KRG. In theory, the article was to be implemented by 2007. Nevertheless, this referendum has not taken place yet. Author of the book "Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building" Mohammed Ahmed claims that after the Gulf War neither Turkey, nor Baghdad wanted the Kurds to control the oil rich Kirkuk province, fearing that might provide the Kurds with sufficient resources and landmass to declare independence.<sup>75</sup> The Province of Kirkuk contains 13% of Iraq's official oil reserves, with an actual percentage that may be much higher.

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<sup>73</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'No:181, 9 June 2017, Press Release Regarding the Decision to Organize Independence Referendum in the KRG on 25 September 2017', [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_181\\_-9-june-2017\\_-press-release-regarding-the-decision-to-organize-independence-referendum-in-the-krq-on-25-september-2017.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_181_-9-june-2017_-press-release-regarding-the-decision-to-organize-independence-referendum-in-the-krq-on-25-september-2017.en.mfa), accessed on 02-09-2017.

<sup>74</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, 'Iraqi Kurdish referendum could lead to civil war: Turkish FM', <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/iraqi-kurdish-administrations-independence-referendum-will-fuel-instability-turkish-minister-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=116789&NewsCatID=510>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

<sup>75</sup> M.M.A. Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, p. 8.

According to some estimates, the ground of Kirkuk could potentially possess as much as 4% of the total global oil-reserves.<sup>76</sup>

Another complicating matter is the ethnically mixed nature of the province, which is inhabited by Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs. While the central Iraqi government claims that Kirkuk falls under their administrative jurisdiction, the Kurds who dominate the province's political life demand incorporation into the KRG. Reflecting its inhabitants, the provincial council of Kirkuk is ethnically mixed, consisting of nine Turkmen, six Arabs and 26 Kurds. It therefore came as a shock to many when the council accepted the proposal to take part in the upcoming referendum, despite an Arab and Turkmen boycott.

As noted earlier, Turkish presidential spokesperson Kalın didn't dispute the KRG's rights to their territory. This is different in the case of Kirkuk. According to Turkey, the Erbil administration has no right to include Kirkuk in the referendum zone. The city has a special place in Turkish history because, according to the spokesperson, it is a Turkmen province that is also inhabited by Arabs and Kurds.<sup>77</sup> Tensions between Turkey and the KRG over Kirkuk rose rapidly after the provincial council decided to raise the Kurdish flag alongside the Iraqi flag at public buildings in April 2017. Erdoğan, who claimed the act stimulated separatist feelings, called on the Kurdish administration to lower the flag or face the consequence of seeing its ties with Turkey sour. In addition, Çavuşoğlu said that in the case of a potential referendum the Kirkuk Turkmen would not stand alone, and the Turkish government would not allow it to happen.<sup>78</sup>

Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), has gone as far as saying that the referendum would be a *casus belli*. According to the party leader, the referendum is “completely against Turkmen and Turkey,”

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<sup>76</sup> G. Gatehouse, 'Kirkuk ethnic tensions scupper Iraq census',

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11925686>, accessed on 06-09-2017.

<sup>77</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 'We Don't Want War Anywhere in the World', <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/82196/we-dont-want-war-anywhere-in-the-world.html>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

<sup>78</sup> H.A. Buyukovali, 'Northern Iraqi Kurds govt must lower flag in Kirkuk', <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/northern-iraqi-kurdish-govt-must-lower-flag-in-kirkuk/788867>, accessed on 06-09-2017.

and is a cause of war.<sup>79</sup> Possibly, the MHP leader was trying to help Erdoğan in convincing Turkish citizens that the Kurds are conspiring against the Turkic people. The AKP however, has been clear in rectifying this position. Mockingly, Prime Minister Yıldırım has expressed that war can only occur between states, and since Turkey won't accept the Kurdish state, such war cannot occur. Furthermore, the only reason for war would be if a state acts against Turkey's sovereign rights. Nevertheless, Yıldırım repeated the general Turkish preoccupation on instability by warning for ethnic complications, while calling for the overall cancellation of the "problem-causing" referendum.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, Barzani has no intention of giving up the province. The Kurdish president holds the vision that Kirkuk will become an example of coexistence, in which there will be senior positions to Turkmens, Arabs and other ethnicities. The Kurdish identity of the province however is not up for discussion, claiming that Kurds will fight to the last person and breath to defend its identity.<sup>81</sup>

While Turkey's language appears disapproving but calm, its non-verbal actions may differ. At a meeting with his Iraqi counterpart in Baghdad, Çavuşoğlu announced new cooperative operations between Turkey and Iraq in their fight against the PKK. At the meeting he also reiterated Turkey's support for Iraq's political integrity and sovereignty, while calling for the KRG to cancel the referendum.<sup>82</sup> While a joint anti-PKK operation in itself is nothing special, it may serve as a way of pressuring the KRG. With the indiscriminate attacks on KRG territory of 2011 still fresh in the Kurdish people's memory, the Turkish government may try to pressure the KRG into canceling, or at least delaying, the referendum. Another potential way of exercising pressure

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<sup>79</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, 'KRG independence referendum may be a 'casus belli' for Turkey: MHP head', <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/kg-independence-referendum-may-be-a-cause-of-war-for-turkey-mhp-head.aspx?pageID=238&nID=117131&NewsCatID=338>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

<sup>80</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, 'Iraqi Kurdish vote not a casus belli: Turkish PM Yıldırım', <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/kg-independence-referendum-not-a-casus-belli-for-turkey-pm-yildirim.aspx?pageID=238&nID=117173&NewsCatID=352>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

<sup>81</sup> Rudaw, 'Kurdistan must stay strong if it wants independence, says Barzani', <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/300820175>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

<sup>82</sup> A News, 'Turkey, Iraq to cooperate to defeat PKK, FM Çavuşoğlu says', <http://www.aneews.com.tr/turkey/2017/08/23/turkey-iraq-to-cooperate-to-defeat-pkk-fm-cavusoglu-says-1503488435>, accessed on 02-09-2017.

on the KRG is collusion by Turkey and Iraq to strangle the region economically by closing their borders. In case of the closure of the only two possible transit routes, being Baghdad's controlled pipelines and Turkey's controlled outlets, Kurdish oil would not be able to reach international markets.<sup>83</sup> Such specific threats however have not been made yet.

### **3.2. Syria and the KRG**

Prior to 1998, Turkey and Syria maintained an uneasy relationship. Large issues of debate concerned the opposing claims on the Hatay province, water disputes over the Euphrates-Tigris Basin and support to the PKK by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. In 1998, the two countries came on the brink of war when Turkey threatened to invade Syria. Faced with Ankara's threats, the two countries signed the Adana Protocol, with which Syria agreed on shutting down support to the PKK and to dismantle PKK military bases on Syrian soil. The arrests of hundreds of PKK militants and the expulsion of PKK leader Öcalan led to a strong improvement of ties.

After the PKK was established in 1978, it received support from Moscow and Syria in the form of military training and the provision of arm arms, with the aim of fighting a proxy war against NATO-member Turkey. When the Soviet regime collapsed, support for the PKK ended as well. Syria however, continued to aid the PKK because of the before-mentioned water and Hatay disputes. After attempts to follow the diplomatic route failed, Turkey threatened Syria with a full on war. Empowered by a strategic relationship with Syria's southern neighbor Israel, Turkey managed to force Syria to expel the PKK from its territory.<sup>84</sup>

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as President of Syria in 2000, a mutual willingness arose between Turkey and Syria to further develop and expand relations. Strong improvements occurred in the economic, political and societal realms, with an increase in bilateral trade, investment and

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<sup>83</sup> A. Danilovich, *Iraqi Federalism and the Kurds: Learning to Live Together*, Surrey: Ashgate 2014, pp. 6-7.

<sup>84</sup> S. Cagapatay, 'Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension', <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension>, accessed on 07-09-2017.

tourism. Furthermore, a Quadripartite High Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established in 2010 among Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The council had the goal to create a zone of free movement of goods and persons among the countries. The plans however never materialized due to the outbreak of the civil war in Syria.<sup>85</sup>

The Adana agreement stood strong for years, until the onset of the Arab Spring. When the protests started, Turkey first tried to convince Assad that Syria wasn't immune to the changes in the region and advised him to pursue liberal reforms. In addition, Turkey offered to assist by sharing democratic experience and sharing expertise in order to guide the reforms. When Syria neglected to act on Turkey's suggestions, Turkey decided to turn its back on Assad. Not only did it condemn the regime's violence, it also became a supporter of opposition by supporting the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. By giving support to the Free Syrian Army, Turkey became part of its neighbor's civil war.<sup>86</sup> As the demise of the regime positioned the Syrian and Turkish regimes against each other, Assad revived support for the PKK by allowing the group to operate freely inside Syria. As a result in 2012, the PKK was able to move between 1500 and 2000 fighters from Syria to the PKK's headquarter in the Qandil Mountains. Assad's actions were worrisome for Turkey, because it feared northern Syria threatened to become a safe haven for the PKK. In theory these worries were not unfounded since, aside from Turkey, Syria has been the only country where the PKK has managed to attract a large following. It is estimated that 20 to 30% of the PKK's fighters in 2012 were Syrian Kurds. Cagapatay argues that Assad's reasons for the renewed PKK support was the creation of a buffer region against cross-border Turkish military actions and to use the PYD as an enforcer of Assad by putting down demonstrations by Kurds in Kurdish areas.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Relations between Turkey-Syria', <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-syria.en.mfa>, accessed on 07-09-2017.

<sup>86</sup> S. Özel and B. Ozkan, 'Illusions versus reality: Turkey's approach to the Middle East and North Africa', *FRIDE policy brief*, no. 200 (2015), p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> S. Cagapatay, 'Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension', <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension>, accessed on 07-09-2017.

Although I agree with Cagapatay's first reason, I disagree with the second reason. Regarding Cagapatay's first reason, I believe that with the heavy resistance that Assad is experiencing combined with limited manpower, it may not be unlikely that Assad has accepted that it will be too difficult to regain all of Syria's old territory. Therefore, I believe that Assad has set his goals on the densely populated West, which possesses agricultural land and industries. This would create the potential scenario of a decentralized post-war Syria, similar to the situation in Iraq in which the Kurds would control the north. Out of this explanation flows my disagreement with Cagapatay on his second point. It appears to be too easily assumed in my opinion that the PYD will serve Assad in return for just a temporary relief of Syrian oppression. Aside from denying Syrian citizenship and state services to some 300.000 Syrian Kurds, the Assad regime has heavily suppressed Kurdish political activity and mobilization. Kurdish individuals have been deprived of entering into legal marriages, participating in elections and owning property. Furthermore, many forms of cultural identity and expression, such as the Kurdish language, commemorative events and cultural celebrations are forbidden. Crackdowns by the Syrian regime on Kurdish protesters have been lethal and many arrests have been made during events such as Nowruz (the Kurdish new year).<sup>88</sup> Although it's true that there is a PKK-faction which is loyal to the Syrian government, that faction does not represent the entire organization. In fact, the Jamestown Foundation has noticed a tension between older PKK members that joined the organization in order to fight against Turkey and a younger, more radical faction, that joined in order to liberate Kurdish territory in Syria.<sup>89</sup> For this reason I believe Kurds will fight all forces if it leads to gaining autonomy and won't simply act as agents of Assad. In fact, while the Kurdish forces and the Syrian army have mostly avoided direct confrontation, with the Kurds focusing their efforts on fighting ISIL in northern Syria, and the government mainly fighting the Sunni Arab

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<sup>88</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria', <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/26/group-denial/repression-kurdish-political-and-cultural-rights-syria>, accessed on 07-09-2017.

<sup>89</sup> J. Brandon, 'The PKK and Syria's Kurds', <https://jamestown.org/program/the-pkk-and-syrias-kurds/>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

rebels in the west, in 2016 the two sides have also started waging war against each other.<sup>90</sup>

The YPG militants have been utterly successful in fighting and consistently taking territory from ISIL. When the militia liberated the Kurdish city of Kobani in 2015, it became the international symbol for Kurdish nationalism in Syria. The liberation of Kobani and the YPG's battle against ISIL have added to Kurdish legitimacy and support from Western actors, while positioning Turkey against its traditional NATO partners. Whereas all of them consider the PKK a terrorist organization, that's not the case for the PYD and YPG. According to Turkey, the PYD and YPG's connection to the PKK is clear: "PYD/YPG was set up under the control of PKK terrorist organization in 2003. They share the same leadership cadres, organizational structure, strategies and tactics, military structure, propaganda tools, financial resources and training camps."<sup>91</sup> Referring to the United States, who support and arm the YPG, Cavusoglu has stated that it is "hard to accept a terror supporter country as an ally," and claimed to know that at least four to five attacks against Turkey came from terrorists whom had received their training in YPG camps.<sup>92</sup>

The extent to which the two parties are affiliated is a matter of debate even for experts. David Pollock, who previously served as senior advisor for the Broader Middle East at the State Department, claims that the PYD has distanced itself from the PKK completely, and has vowed not to attack Turkey, nor to see the country as an enemy. The PKK and PYD are different entities in the same nature that the Iraqi-Kurds and the Syrian Kurds diverge from each other. According to Pollock, Kurds have abandoned the pan-Kurdish project and are out for their own interest in their own country by actively trying to realize autonomy, or at least the establishment of ethnic rights. Disagreeing

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<sup>90</sup> A. McDowall, 'Kurds versus Syrian army battle intensifies, complicating multi-fronted war', <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/kurds-versus-syrian-army-battle-intensifies-complicating-multi-fronted-war-idUSKCN1oVoGD>, accessed on 07-09-2017.

<sup>91</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'PKK', <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/pkk.en.mfa>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

<sup>92</sup> Anadolu Agency, 'US arming YPG in Syria 'intolerable' for Turkey', <http://aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-arming-ypg-in-syria-intolerable-for-turkey/721867>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

with Pollock, Cagapatay's definition of the PKK-PYD affiliation is closer to the one given by the Turkish government. According Cagapatay, there is still too much of an overlap with the PKK; "there is a significant number of Syrian Kurds in the PKK's rank and file and leadership, and vice versa a number of Turkish Kurds in the PYD's rank and file and leadership." Pollock doesn't negate Cagapatay's claims, but states that these are individuals who don't set PYD policy and that the PYD is definitively not subordinate to the PKK.<sup>93</sup>

In August 2016, Turkey launched its own military operation "Euphrates Shield" in Syria. Turkey sent warplanes, tanks and troops to support the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which consist of mostly Sunni Muslim fighters. The operation targeted both ISIL and the PYD with the goal of stopping ISIL's access to the Turkish border and halting the YPG's successes. The aim is to prevent the YPG from crossing the Euphrates westwards and linking up the three present Kurdish cantons in northern Syria. At the end of March 2017, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim concluded the operation by stating it had been successfully finished.<sup>94</sup> President Erdogan hasn't ruled out further operations, stating on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 that: "Especially in Syria and Iraq, we will not take a step back on any subject related to future of our nation and our brothers in the region. All options in the region are being taken into consideration."<sup>95</sup>

The Syrian peace process has been a long process that started with the first peace initiatives by the Arab League in 2011, to the Geneva IV peace talks in 2017 and the parallel running Astana talks. Turkey's position with regards to the peace process appears clearly formulated on the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, declaring: "The objective of a stable and peaceful Syria can only be achieved through a process of democratic transition that will meet the legitimate demands and aspirations of all Syrians. This process

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<sup>93</sup> Washington Institute, "The Syrian Kurds: Whose Ally?",

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh1bk6ACrS8>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

<sup>94</sup> Al Jazeera, "Turkey end 'Euphrates Shield' operation in Syria", accessed on 08-09-2017.

<sup>95</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "Turkey, Iran furious over Kirkuk's participation in independence referendum", <http://www.hurriyettailynews.com/president-erdogan-hints-at-further-operation-into-syria-and-iraq.aspx?pageID=238&nID=117399&NewsCatID=338>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

should be owned and led by the Syrians with the support of the international community. The future of Syria must be determined by the Syrians themselves.”<sup>96</sup> However clear this formulation appears, there is a large debate over what the “legitimate aspirations and demands” are, since there is much controversy over who constitute as the legitimate parties in the peace process. Despite the PYD’s success in establishing the self-autonomous Rojava region, the dominant Kurdish parties are consistently refused from participating in the Syrian peace process due to Turkish objections. Neither the PYD, its armed wing YPG, nor the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been allowed to partake in the Geneva and Astana initiatives. Instead of including the PYD and its affiliates, Turkey has chosen to admit the PYD’s rival, Syria’s Kurdish National Council (KNC), which is incorporated in the opposition delegation. The KNC also supports a federal system in order to recognize Kurdish rights. The council is a collective of Kurdish parties that was founded in Erbil with the support of Barzani. The KNC is accused by the PYD of being under Turkish control. In turn, the KNC accuses the PYD of having close ties with the Syrian regime and therefore not being a legitimate member of the opposition.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore head of the party Ibrahim Biro, clearly depicts the PYD as the Syrian arm of the PKK, claiming that it exploits the Syrian war in order to suppress and eliminate any group it considers a threat in their quest of asserting its control over Northern Syria. Supposedly, the PYD makes use of ethnic cleansing and other violations of human rights, of which Biro’s own abduction by PYD militants for six hours is an example. Nevertheless, Biro doesn’t exclude a rapprochement between the two parties.<sup>98</sup>

In the new status quo, the PYD has become the overwhelmingly dominant force, while the KNC has lost popularity and several KNC-parties have defected to the PYD. For this reason, holding negotiations without the PYD

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<sup>96</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Relations between Turkey and Syria’, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-syria.en.mfa>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

<sup>97</sup> M. Hamed, ‘Kurdish National Council: We must remove the top of the pyramid in Syria’, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/kurdish-official-biro-opposition-syria-regime.html>, accessed on 08-09-2017.

<sup>98</sup> Daily Sabah, ‘Western nations ignore rights violations by PYD, head of Syria’s Kurdish National Council says’, accessed on 08-09-2017.

appear to be doomed to fail since the PYD won't accept any outcomes that have been established without their participation.

### **Conclusion**

The AKP has been revolutionary in reframing the Kurdish Question into terms of identity, whereas since 1923 the issue had been dealt with militarily in terms of a threat to national security. When the AKP came to power in 2002, the future looked promising, as a new "EU-Turkey" appeared to usher a new era. Erdoğan's denunciation of the country's previous governments in handling the Kurdish question at his Diyarbakır speech of 2005 gave many people hope, both inside and outside Turkey. But these thoughts may have been based on a, perhaps naïve, idealistic idea of perfect harmonization on the basis of Sunni Islam.

As time would progress, reforms stagnated and public support for the AKP among the Kurds dropped, which came to expression in the 2009 local election. Neither Sunni Islam, nor socioeconomic improvements had been the unifiers Erdoğan expected them to be and it became clear that identity still played an important role. Until this point the AKP can still be given a compliment, as it tried to take into account the Kurdish wishes by initiating the democratic opening, and taking a risk by conducting the secret Oslo Peace Talks with terrorists. In the 2007 Solution Talks, the AKP demonstrated its ability to adapt to situations and accepted to negotiate with Öcalan directly.

Nevertheless, neither side made enough efforts. Reforms by the AKP government were never sufficiently significant and the PKK never withdrew large numbers of its forces from Turkish territory. The solution processes never created a real trust and willingness to concede on both sides, which made it utterly vulnerable to outside events, such as the Siege of Kobani. The AKP has shown that it is willing to change its rhetoric in order to attract a certain electoral base, when the context requires it. At the moment, the AKP has changed its discourse when it comes to the PKK and HDP. Demonizing the two parties has become part of their policy in order to create an

atmosphere of fear in the country, in which only the AKP can serve as a true protector.

Many probably doubt whether the AKP is truly capable and willing to achieve peace. The rapprochement with the KRG and the multiple peace initiatives may suggest they are capable and willing. The establishment of relations on multiple levels between Turkey and the Kurdish KRG has been historical and may suggest that this can be repeated. However, when looking at the relationship with the KRG more closely, it becomes clear that Turkey will only have peace at its own terms, which in theory corresponds to an inferior role played by the counterparty. The KRG has good relations with Turkey on the premise that it joins the fight against the PKK and will not try to reach independence. Whenever the KRG slightly derails from this path, it receives threatening language or in the worst case physical attacks through indiscriminate anti-PKK operations. I expect that if the KRG goes through with obtaining independence, it will be very plausible that Turkey will cut them off in every way possible (form alliances with the KRG's neighboring countries, halt oil-trade and boycott trade) and perhaps even resort to military intervention.

When it comes to the PYD, the situation appears to be at a stalemate. Turkey has no interest in dealing with the party and has expressed it will never allow the Kurds to establish a new state at their border. Despite their disassociation from the PKK, Turkey is far from convinced and claims to have proof that they conducted terrorist attacks in Turkey. It appears that the only way that a normalization of ties with the PYD can be established is if the PKK manages to normalize ties with the AKP through a new solution process, or the very unlikely scenario in which the PYD would agree to engage militarily against the PKK to truly demonstrate its dissociation from the organization (as the KRG did). Nevertheless, as a result of the yes-vote in the Kurdish referendum, I expect Turkey to tread carefully with foreign Kurdish powers. Throughout the process, Barzani has positioned himself humbly in every step and continued to assure Turkey that it had no interest in Turkey's Kurds. Nevertheless in the eyes of the AKP, the independence referendum has been a

stab in the back that may incite secessionist feelings among Turkey's own citizens. Therefore, even if ties between the PYD and AKP could be normalized, it would be interesting to see if the AKP could ever support the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region again.

To finalize, the AKP has engaged in flip-flop approaches both domestically and across the border. Domestically it has repeatedly acknowledged the Kurdish Question in terms of an identity problem, only to take it back later and reframe it as a security or socioeconomic problem, or making claims that the Kurdish Question was solved. In the same manner, Turkey has worked together with the KRG, allied with them militarily and made them prosperous, only to boycott their quest for independence. Today, Erdoğan has problems in convincing the Turkish-Kurdish public of his intentions. The surpassing of the ten percent threshold by the HDP has been an historic proof of this and a shocking signal to the AKP, which was reaffirmed with the tight victory in the constitutional referendum. The current situation doesn't look suited for renewed peace talks, even though both sides agree that military engagement is not the solution. The country is momentarily more than 30 years into the conflict with more than 40.000 deaths and is currently experiencing many displaced people as a result of it. The current situation urgently calls for a solution. Only time will tell if Erdoğan will act on the signals he is being given in order to regain the Kurdish vote for the presidential elections of 2019, or if he will increase his authoritarianism and perhaps win it by resorting to unfair practices.

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